

Learning support: Perceptions and experiences of distance learners in Botswana

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Abstract

This study pertains to the provision of learning support to remote distance learners in Botswana, who enrolled for a secondary school-leaving certificate. The purpose of the study was to document learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support and to improve service delivery. The study, which was informed by an interpretive paradigm using a mixed-methods approach, is underpinned by Holmberg' theory of conversational learning (2003). Qualitative methods that involved semi-structured interviews, journals, document study and observations were used to collect data, while a questionnaire provided nested quantitative data. Data sets were triangulated and trustworthiness was enhanced by using Atlas.ti™ for qualitative analysis and SAS version 8 software to generate percentages. The key findings showed that learners exhibited high intrinsic motivation and 72.1 per cent of them were satisfied with the learning support provided. This substantiates the notion that learner motivation remains a key attribute for successful distance learning in any context. However, policy and managerial flaws frustrated and unintentionally disadvantaged learners. Implications for practice include policy reviews and adoption of best practice. A survey to establish learner needs, expectations and aspirations is critical for the design and development of appropriate learning materials, and for the delivery of quality learning support.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, students enrolled for modules offered via distance education have at least a fixed abode and a postal address. They may even have access to learning support through a telephone, or by visiting a learning centre close to where they live. However, for certain communities, access to such resources is simply not possible. For example, how does Gcagae Xade – a descendant of the first people of the Kalahari Desert, living a nomadic lifestyle in a very remote area of Botswana – cope with the demands of learning at a distance? It is learners like Xade who piqued our interest in acquiring an in-depth understanding of how the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi distance learners perceived and experienced the learning support offered by the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). Learning support offered by BOCODOL is delivered via face-to-face and mediated means. The face-to-face support involved: orientation, group tutorials, study skills training, individual help from tutors, weekend tutorials, and motivational workshops. The mediated support included: written feedback on assignments and mock examinations, tutorial letters and radio programmes.

Between 2002 and 2005, 497 learners in the Kang region had enrolled for the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE), but only 54 learners completed their courses (BOCODOL Kang Regional Office 2005). Annually, most learners who wrote their examinations achieved less than 50 per cent. This was puzzling, since the provision of learning support via 25 BOCODOL satellite learning centres was considered to be well established – as endorsed by the Remote Learner Strategy Consultancy Report (Lelliot 2002). Furthermore, the learner support policy (BOCODOL 2001, 2008) aimed to reduce the academic challenges faced by remote distance learners. This study endeavoured to document the views of remote distance learners on the efficacy of learning support in an underdeveloped context, in the western part of Botswana.

CONTEXT

Botswana is a landlocked country, roughly the size of France or Texas (Nage-Sibande 2005; Tlhalefang and Oduaran 2006). It is located in southern Africa and shares borders with Zambia to the north, South Africa to the south, Zimbabwe to the east and Namibia to the west. Botswana covers an area of 582 000 square kilometres, of which 84 per cent is covered by the Kalahari Desert (Pfothenhauer 2009). The eastern part of the country, which is mainly occupied by the Tswana-speaking groups, has arable soil and good rainfall conducive for cultivation. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities inhabit the Kalahari Desert in the western part of Botswana. In Setswana, the language of the Tswana ethnic group,

the word *Mokgalagari* refers to a person who lives in the Kalahari Desert by foraging, and is considered to be of inferior status (Hitchcock and Smith 1982).

Historical evidence shows that in the past the Bakgalagadi lived in a similar way to the Basarwa. They trapped game and gleaned a living by collecting wild plants and hoeing with a sharpened stick. They did not have fixed settlements to return to, but were nomadic and lacked centralised leadership and political organisation (Hitchcock and Smith 1982). The Bakgalagadi have, however, been practising an agro-based economy for years, although they share the marginalised status of the Basarwa.

The Basarwa communities now live in very remote settlements, since the government relocated them from the wildlife game reserves and national parks. This change in territory has led the Basarwa – traditionally a nomadic people – to adopt less mobile ways of living, while keeping domestic animals and working on farms. To a very limited degree, they still carry out their hunting and gathering activities as part of their subsistence survival, but this occurs on a restricted scale, as official hunting licences are now required. The settlements are geographically isolated from service centres, have poor road and telecommunication infrastructure, and have very limited employment opportunities. Poor telecommunication infrastructure makes mobile phone access unreliable, despite the fact that it is affordable. This makes learner support by mobile phone impractical, even though it is becoming more common in southern Africa.

Botswana's educational goals, as encapsulated in *Vision 2016*, are meant to provide all citizens with opportunities for continued and universal education, with options after completing the BGCSE to take up vocational or technical training as an alternative to purely academic study. The goal of education, as stated in *Vision 2016*, is not only to produce better employees, but also to empower and encourage citizens to create employment through the establishment of new enterprises. However, educational opportunities beyond junior secondary school are lean, and competition to qualify for the BGCSE (the exit qualification) is stiff. There are only 28 senior secondary schools in the country. Two of these schools are situated in the western part of Botswana. Many learners in the area fail to obtain places at either of these senior secondary schools after completing their junior secondary education, because of limited spaces or low academic achievement. About five in every ten learners who do not obtain places at senior secondary schools, end up enrolling at BOCODOL, which offers the same qualification via distance mode. Young adults from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities enrolled in large numbers (465) in 2002, when distance education was introduced in their area. However, their academic performance and completion rates have been poor, despite the ODL providers' learner support policy and the learner

charter claims. The perceptions and experiences of such remote distance learners have not yet been systematically investigated, hence our contribution to the existing literature on the topic at hand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner support is a broad term, referring to the services provided to distance learners so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully. Learner support consists of three subsections: learning or academic support, personal support and administrative support (Simpson 2002; Tait 2000; Thorpe 2002). In practice, it is difficult to separate the three subsections. The provision of learner support, which is imperative in distance education, aims to enhance the academic performance of distance learners. Learning support (as a subset of learner support) is the academic assistance given to a learner enrolled for a distance education course in order to enhance academic performance (Simpson 2002; Tait 2000; Thorpe 2002). The activities that make up learning support delivered to distance learners include orientation seminars, group tutorials, assignment feedback, tutorial letters, radio, mock examinations, individual help by tutors, weekend tutorials, study skills and motivational seminars. These activities are currently core in supporting distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana.

The main challenge for open and distance learning providers is to ensure that an effective learner support system exists to help learners make the paradigm shift from traditional teacher-centred delivery mode to mediated distance learning. Levy and Beaulieu (2003) and Robinson (2004) have observed inadequate planning for learner support in distance education institutions. When distance education institutions fail to plan for the provision of appropriate learner support services, systematic learning support is adversely affected and the most likely outcome is that distance learners drop out of their programmes. Robinson's review (2004) of the literature on learner support concludes that most of the research findings are general progress reports without a theoretical basis. Robinson (2004) further argues that some studies are unsubstantiated or lack validity when transferred to other contexts. While empirical literature addressing issues of learner support in a developed context is in abundance, research on underdeveloped contexts in southern Africa appears to be sparse (ADEA 2002; Nonyongo and Ngengebule 2008). The voices of distance learners in remote and marginalised communities seem silent with regard to their views on the provision of learning support by institutions of learning. This observation is similar to that made by Usman (2001) and others. Understanding the experiences of those learners could help service providers improve on learner support strategies, which ought to enhance academic

performance and completion rates. This study is distinctive, as it documents the perspectives of distance learners living in remote geographical areas, who are transitioning from a traditional nomadic way of life to a more settled modern context.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was underpinned by Holmberg's theory of conversational learning (2003) and an interpretive paradigm using a mixed-methods approach, which allowed for exploration in a natural setting and also acknowledged the voices and views of the research participants (Chilisa and Preece 2005; Creswell 2005; LeCompte and Preissle 1993; Leedy and Ormrod 2001). While one may not be able to generalise from a single case study (Merriam 1988), the case study approach was an ideal design, as it focused on gaining insight into the perspectives of the research participants as the unit of analysis at the four research sites, i.e. Kang, Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade. The advantage of an interpretive position is that it recognises the existence of multiple social realities and the need for a researcher to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their social experiences (Clarke and Dawson 1999). The research context was, therefore, approached with an open mind in order to permit multiple perspectives of learning support to emerge.

Qualitative data collection methods involved semi-structured interviews, journals, document study and observations, while a questionnaire provided nested quantitative data. In the first phase of data collection, a questionnaire designed with closed and open-ended items was administered. In the second phase, interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Data from multiple sources were collapsed and coded to identify themes. Data sets were triangulated and trustworthiness was enhanced by using Atlas.ti™ for qualitative analysis and SAS version 8 software for generating percentages. Mixed-methods research techniques were applied in this study, for the purposes of triangulation and trustworthiness of data, as recommended by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and Creswell (2005). We endeavoured to adhere to internationally accepted ethical considerations, and were very aware that participants were vulnerable in several respects. The constraints experienced in undertaking this study were related to understanding the SeKgalagadi and Sesarwa languages spoken by participants. Assistance was sought from two colleagues who are proficient in both these languages, which facilitated interrogation and the interpretation of data.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in terms of participants' biographical data, their reasons for enrolling, their definition of learner support, and their expectations and experiences of the various support modes they were offered. The study of documents and observations revealed curriculum cross-cutting issues. Although learners expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with different modes of learner support, their overall distance learning experiences measured 72.1 per cent satisfaction and 27.9 per cent dissatisfaction.

Learners' perceptions and experiences: Biographical data

There were 29 female (75%) and 10 male (25%) research participants. One distance learner did not indicate gender. Our conclusion is that there were probably more female learners than male, because men spend most of their time away at the cattle posts, hunting or searching for employment, while females remain at the settlements, attending to children and doing domestic chores. However, male learners were more satisfied than their female peers with eight types of learning support, while females were more satisfied with only one type – the orientation and the motivational seminars. There was a 12 per cent difference in male and female satisfaction, which may suggest that the learning support accommodated more male than female needs.

The age of the learner participants ranged from 18 to 45 years. Seventy-five per cent of participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, and 25 per cent were in the 31–45-year age group. On average, 69 per cent of the younger (18–30) participants indicated that they were satisfied with the learning support, while 66 per cent of participants aged 31 to 45 years also felt satisfied. The average difference was small (3%). This means that overall the provision of learning support was perceived more or less the same by the two age groups.

The satisfaction of those who spoke Sesarwa was 62 per cent, 73 per cent for those who spoke SeKgalagadi, and 84 per cent for those who spoke other languages. The distance learners who spoke other languages were also fluent in SeKgalagadi. Courses are only available in English (and Setswana for language studies). The reasons why these learners enrolled for a programme offered via distance education mode, were also explored. In this article, pseudonyms and verbatim quotes are used to provide a rich description of learners' perceptions and experiences.

Reason for enrolling

The most common reason for enrolling was to obtain a certificate, in order to gain access to further education or employment. Participants indicated that even

menial jobs required a BGCSE level of education, because of the increased competition for limited employment opportunities in Botswana. This is what Dineo and Kagiso had to say when asked why they had enrolled:

Dineo: So that my certificate should be better, so that when I apply for something they can take me because of better results. Because I want to upgrade my studies.

Kagiso: Because I do not have a BGCSE certificate and for job opportunities and due to day-to-day style of living I enrolled for BGCSE to have that opportunity to reach the Vision we are talking about. In addition, to achieve that 'MOTTO' we engaged i.e. all of us is supposed to be educated in Vision 2016, that's why.

Both participants appeared enthusiastic about their studies. Distance learners' conceptualisation and expectations of learning support are critical for meeting their needs, as explained below.

Conceptualisation and expectations of learning support

Distance learners at Kang site understood the concept of learning support better than those at Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade, probably due to their proximity and easy access to tutors and ODL staff. The comment by Pau encapsulates the general understanding of learning support that distance learners received at Kang.

Pau: Our learning support is very good because they give us some books, audios to listen to, it's like a tutor is teaching in class and you can understand.

Distance learners from Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade sites conceived the idea of learning support differently. They believed it meant being taught by a teacher in a classroom. During the interview, this is what Lizwe said:

We don't want to come to class with some questions or problems that we encounter at home. We want to be taught and not to be assisted where we meet problems. I do believe most of us do not understand what is meant by studying through distance learning. We still need to be taught not tutoring.

Lizwe's negative response to learning via the distance education mode implies that the pre-enrolment counselling and induction programmes had not addressed these issues which are so fundamental to studying in isolation, on one's own. However, Venter (2003), commenting on comparable groups, also suggested cultural reasons for preferring interaction and group learning over solitary learning at home. The reasons for inadequate pre-enrolment campaigns were cited by ODL staff as inadequate funding and limited personnel to cover the vast geographical area covered by the Kalahari Desert of Botswana. The learner support policy claims were also not effectively put into practice at some sites, which may have influenced the expectations of remote distance learners. The

Basarwa and Bakgalagadi distance learners expected to be provided with teachers and to be taught in the same way as in a public school. This is not surprising, as they were first-time distance learners and their experience of teaching and learning was shaped beforehand by what they had experienced while attending public schools. Despite these learners' expectations, they had positive perceptions and experiences of the different modes of learning support.

Learners' perceptions and experiences: Types of learning support

Support through orientation rated the highest (85%), followed by group tutorials (83%), study skills (82%), and individual help from tutors (82%). Weekend tutorials (77%) and motivational workshops (74%) were rated lower than the first four, but still attracted positive support. Distance learners valued highly the academic transactions that occurred through face-to-face support. The presence of ODL staff and part-time tutors was identified by learners as critical in enhancing their learning at a distance.

Learners' perceptions of the different types of face-to-face support were particularly positive, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Level of satisfaction: face-to-face support

Type of support	Percentage of distance learners who were satisfied
Orientation	85
Group tutorials	83
Study skills training	82
Individual help from tutors	82
Weekend tutorials	77
Motivational workshops	74

Learners were generally less satisfied with the mediated support provided, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Level of satisfaction: mediated support

Type of support	Satisfied participants
Assignment feedback	76%
Tutorial letters	63%
Radio programme	55%
Mock examination feedback	47%

Assignment feedback was perceived to be very important by 76 per cent of distance learner participants, who identified personalised feedback anchored in tutors' empathy as highly motivating. Tutorial letters attracted 63 per cent, radio programmes 55 per cent, and mock examination feedback 47 per cent. The reason for the dissatisfaction with support provided by radio appeared to be poor signal reception in all the remote settlements where learners lived. Mock examinations were not conducted near all settlements due to logistical challenges, which included distance and personnel constraints. A close analysis of participants' responses suggests that poor infrastructure, coupled with geographical isolation, accounted for lower levels of satisfaction. Participants who were less isolated had access to more support services and were more satisfied than those who were more isolated. There were also cross-cutting curriculum issues that had potentially negative effects.

Cross-cutting curriculum issues

The three cross-cutting curriculum issues that emerged from the study of documents, observations and interviews, are the language of instruction, the range of subjects offered and the culture-bound learning materials. English is used as a medium of instruction in all subjects, except for teaching the Setswana language. English, as the medium of instruction, presented challenges to the participants in this study as it is not a lingua franca, although the participants would have been exposed to it in earlier phases of their formal education. Their own native languages are as yet to be codified.

The subject choice available to BOCODOL distance learners is limited, in comparison to the BGCE curriculum offered in conventional public schools. Subjects such as Chemistry, Physics, Biology or Information and Communication Technology (i.e. subjects which could have a direct impact on their further career/study options) are not available to distance learners, including those from the Bakgalagadi and Basarwa communities. Distance learners would be better able to obtain employment in specific sectors, e.g. mining, if they had studied

sciences. Their options lie only in subjects that are perceived to have low status, compared to the pure sciences. The current curriculum frustrates distance learners who complete the BGCSE, only to discover that their educational choices are restricted. The importance of the link between learning and its application for a livelihood is emphasised by Kere (2006). Dewey (1944, 99 in Perry 2009) argues that there should be a diverse offering of curriculum and instructional approaches to ensure that all learners can reach their maximum individual potential, and that social classes should not be restricted to particular types of education. Such a lack is also not aligned to the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education, or to human rights issues.

The BOCODOL learner charter promises learners high-quality and up-to-date study materials. However, the reality at the time of conducting this study was that the learning materials had not been reviewed since their first publication in 2001. The materials had also been prepared in English, at a level unsuitable for learners with limited English proficiency. There was also inadequate language learning support scaffolded into the material, and several tasks or references were culture bound. Tutors also identified many technical and grammatical errors in the study units. Such flaws can contribute to poor understanding and numerous frustrations – particularly for remote learners without easy access to tutors who may have clarified the content.

The findings indicate that positive perceptions were driven by high intrinsic motivation, a strong desire to transition to modernity, as well as an appreciation for human presence and emotive support in distance learning. Negative perceptions and experiences were primarily as a result of tension between policy claims and their implementation in practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study fall into three themes: *transition*, *transactional presence* and *tension*. *Transition* relates to the state in which distance learners from marginalised communities find themselves as they negotiate their survival in a dynamic and changing world. Learners' perception of obtaining the BGCSE qualification is that it is critically important for their successful *transition* from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle through an agro-based economy to an industrial one, as envisaged in the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education and supported by the country's *Vision 2016*. This may be a false promise, yet there is no returning to their nomadic lifestyles. However, Davis (2009) challenges the notion that nomadic peoples must adapt to the 'modern' economy. Our observations in the case of Botswana, is that all citizens – including those with a history of being

nomadic – have, over the years, been systematically compelled to adapt to the modern economy by either political or economic circumstances.

The value of education for marginalised communities in *transition* lies in the possibilities of breaking the cycle of poverty encountered over several generations as a result of political and socio-economic disruptions by more powerful communities. Learners from these communities enrol in the hope of obtaining a BGCSE certificate, in order to enhance their opportunities for further education and training, and for paid employment outside their remote settlements. However, their expectations and conceptualisation of learning support demonstrate a dependency on tutors and a surface approach to learning, rather than practising a deeper, meaning-centred approach that requires less direction and support from tutors, as supported by the findings of Wheeler (2002). Some authors (Dzakiria 2005; Shin 2003) highlight additional dimensions, such as the importance of oral communication, dialogue and community in constructing meaning.

Transactional presence describes the connectedness learners experienced with the ODL institution via staff and tutors (Shin 2003). Distance learners claimed that having access to a human face or voice inspired them to persist in their studies. Similar to the learners in the studies of Venter (2003) and Dzakiria (2005), distance learners in this study felt they were cared for by empathetic ODL staff and tutors who supported them. They similarly wanted academic guidance and feedback, which suggests that personalised academic support was highly valued by the participants. This study confirms Holmberg's (2003) theory of conversational learning and its applicability in a less developed context. Personalised learning support, anchored on empathy, remains a key driving force in sustaining distance learners' motivation to learn. The transactional presence of ODL staff and tutors is indispensable in the provision of effective learning support, and is even more critical for distance learners, disadvantaged by context, who have no other options.

Although 72.1 per cent of participants indicated their satisfaction and had positive perceptions and experiences of face-to-face and mediated support, *tension* was evident in terms of policy and practice. Current institutional policy encourages educational expansion even to the geographically remote areas, while providing learning support in practice is a challenge in terms of the limited human and financial resources available to such remote learners. Due to a mismatch between policy and practice, learners in this study were disadvantaged in many respects. The challenges they faced included geographical and psychological isolation in terms of distance and connectivity, curriculum content that did not resonate with their environment, and a medium of instruction that became a barrier to learning. Expanding educational access to remote areas without the necessary

human and financial resources, is a major source of tension between policy and practice. Policy statements raised expectations that could not be met. The result is that 27.9 per cent of distance learner participants who were not able to access the expected learning support services were dissatisfied. Despite the dissatisfaction of some participants, the findings of this study have given distance learners from marginalised communities a voice that previously had been inaudible and the challenges that affected their learning are no longer speculative. It has, therefore, provided supportive empirical evidence for policy and practice to meet the needs of distance learners from marginalised communities, studying in a developing context. The findings are pertinent for ODL policy makers, managers and practitioners, who ought to address the tensions that arise because policies are not responsive enough to the needs and context of marginalised communities.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has immediate implications for ODL policy and practice: the revision of policy formulation and implementation, with regard to the provision of a learning support service that meets the needs and aspirations of distance learners from marginalised communities. In order to enhance the conceptualisation of learning support and the expectations of remote distance learners, and to address some of the curriculum needs, a strategy that takes on board marginalised communities' traditional education and indigenous knowledge systems would provide collaborative input into curriculum and teaching/learning models. This can be achieved by involving various stakeholders, including traditional leadership and their communities. In other words, the challenges faced by distance learners from marginalised communities require a more political and economic commitment from various national and local authorities, including the District Council, as well as local political and traditional representatives. These stakeholders should be made aware of the potential role of the distance education mode in contributing to social development and the empowerment of marginalised communities. An improved awareness of the value of ODL could lead to a political acceptance by national and local government, NGOs and the private sector. This stakeholder support would see the prioritisation of ODL issues and financial support for the development of educational facilities and resources in underdeveloped contexts. Infrastructural development for information and communication technology (ICT) and libraries could help promote a reading culture, while advancing a knowledge society.

Furthermore, financial and appropriate human resources should be mobilised to enhance learning support initiatives. In order to develop appropriate strategies

that enhance best practice in the delivery of learning support in underdeveloped contexts, the following strategies are recommended:

- The contents of the BGCSE curriculum should reflect aspects of the socio-cultural and geographic contexts of marginalised communities, in order for distance learners from marginalised communities to relate more readily to the new knowledge. Such an inclusion would enhance the learning process, as learners would be able to connect with learning materials that are relevant to their own context. This is more likely to promote positive academic performance.
- In light of the medium of instruction, which is not the native language spoken by remote learners, learning support should be comprehensive and be embedded in the learning materials. In other words, language and study skills support should be made an integral part of the learning materials.

CONCLUSION

Distance learners value education that provides them with prospects to negotiate their transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a modern one. The quality of learning support rendered to distance learners from marginalised communities was compromised by tensions between policy and practice, hence transactional presence was restricted and could not be experienced equitably at all sites.

For effective learning support, the transactional presence of the ODL institution, staff and tutors is critically important for all distance learners, irrespective of their geographical location. The more positive the learners' perceptions and experiences of institutional support, the greater their interest and motivation, and the more likely effective learning is to occur (Holmberg 2003; Shin 2003). The high level (72.1%) of overall satisfaction which the remote distance learners expressed with the various modes of learning support confirms Shin's (2003) assertions that the transactional presence of ODL staff and tutors is critical in distance learning. It also confirms that successful distance learners are driven by intrinsic motivation, and quality personalised and affective learning support (Holmberg 2003). When such conditions exist, even in underprivileged contexts, distance learners are able to defy the odds. Gcagae Xade may not have a fixed abode or postal address, and may be more adept at tracking game than sending a text message, but with personalised and relevant learning support he, too, would be able to attain an academic qualification, which may enable him to truly become part of an educated and informed nation, as per Botswana's *Vision 2016*.

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